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WASHINGTON, D.C.— The two-year armed conflict in Syria has left at least 80,000 people dead and more than 5 million displaced. In his May 13, 2013 press conference with UK Prime Minister David Cameron, President Obama noted the difficulty of “putting things back together” in Syria after “the furies have been unleashed.”

These “furies” include a brutal conflict that increasingly is sectarian in nature. The recent massacre in Bayda and the kidnapping of bishops of the Syriac and Greek Orthodox Churches underscore the fact that what began as a political struggle in Syria has become a war in which sectarian rhetoric and religiously-motivated violence have led to sectarian divides.

“We are deeply worried for the lives of Archbishop Mor Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church, who were kidnapped on April 22 while providing humanitarian aid to the war-ravaged people of Syria,” said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. “These two religious leaders put aside their own safety by travelling to one of the worst areas of fighting to help those Syrians left with few basic necessities after more than two years of war. The United States and the international community must leave no stone unturned to free the Archbishops and halt sectarian violence,” said Dr. Swett.

The civil war in Syria began in March 2011 when peaceful protests by mostly Sunni Muslim opponents of the al-Assad regime called for the repeal of the country's abusive emergency law, space for political parties, and the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. The civil war that has now entered into its third year has caused at least 80,000 deaths 1.3 million refugees and at least 3.6 million internally displaced people. The brutal massacre by al-Assad's armed forces in the town of Bayda on May 2 claimed the lives of dozens, including women and children, largely from that town's Sunni Muslim community.

"The use of sectarian violence and rhetoric will destroy any hope that Syria will emerge from this war as a representative democracy in which human rights and religious freedom for all Syrians is promoted and protected," said Dr. Lantos Swett. "The kidnapping of the Archbishops and the massacre of innocents are only the latest attempts to inflame tensions between religious communities and divide them along sectarian lines. The al-Assad regime and some opposition forces, including those foreign to Syria who espouse violence based on extreme religious ideologies, increasingly are stoking sectarian tensions as a tactic in the civil war."

USCIRF's report, "[Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria](#)" includes preliminary findings and recommendations on the situation in Syria and underscores the detrimental effects of sectarianism on Syria's current and future religious freedom environment.

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